

1100 words

Pierre J. ...  
Rathbone ...  
B. H. ...  
Meredith ...

BLACK BART.

J. H. ... THE

There was only one vacant chair when I entered the restaurant and that was at a small table by the window, a table which was laid for two only.

As I threaded my way through the maze of diners towards the empty chair, I had a good look at my prospective vis-a-vis. In my day, one had to be careful, even suspicious of strangers one met in the "Monogram" Sacramento City's most popular restaurant.

The face I saw, however, was at first glance, that of a pleasant, benevolent looking old gentleman, so any fears I had were quickly allayed and I seated myself comfortably, my mind at rest.

For a while neither of us said a word, and I was wondering how I could break the ice when I was saved the trouble.

The old gentleman looked over at me with a smile and asked if I minded if he smoked. He always, he continued, had coffee and a cigar to finish with, and if I would join him in another he would be delighted.

I accepted with pleasure for I like company, and my host promised to be interesting for now that I had had a good look at him I could see that behind that placid exterior there was a

something, something indefinable, yet which hinted that this retired old business man - as I took him to be - had known another and more stirring life. Nor was I mistaken, for he proved a most entertaining companion and I listened enthralled to his tales and description of incidents of early pioneering days in California and Nevada. He had prospected all over both states in his younger days and with dramatic intensity related many stories of the dangers which one encountered in the quest for gold.

In graphic sentences he painted vivid word pictures of the horrors of hunger and thirst in the blazing heat of some waterless desert, of stampedes to new discoveries and the ruthless brutality of man in the rush and lust for wealth. He told of boom towns, mush room towns that rose in a night, flourished for a day and died leaving nothing but a collection of rotting huts and the memory of a claim which petered out to mark their one time glory.

My coffee grew cold and my cigar went out as I listened to stories of Indian massacres, robbery and violence, of fortunes won and lost in the gambling halls of some long forgotten boom town, and all the wild life of the gold fields. The quiet mannered, softly spoken man before me seemed to have been everywhere where gold had been found or heard of, and related episodes in which many people, some famous, others notorious figured.

One man in particular aroused my interest, and when the old gentleman paused to light a fresh cigar I seized the chance to ask if all the stories told of Black Bart, the famous bandit of the old Santa Fé trail were true and if he was the brutal ruffian history claimed him to be.

My hosts face grew cold and hard and the softly spoken voice had now a bitter edge to it as he answered.

Black Bart, he said, was certainly a highwayman and had many robberies to his account - and for that he made no excuse - but as regards his being a ruthless, cold blooded killer, that was absolutely untrue.

And now I heard the history of Black Bart, miner, bandit, prisoner and pensioner.

Ed. Coles, the highwayman's proper name was the son of respectable well to do parents and in his youth worked on his father's ranch just like any other boy. In time, however, the confines of the little ranch grew too small for one of his adventurous spirit, so one fine day, while yet in his teens he said adieu to his family and followed the lure of the open road.

For some years he worked here and there at any job that offered, but never stayed in one place for long, for a wander lust, inherited from pioneering forefathers, kept urging him ever on, ever curious to know what lay beyond the next hill.

One summer when Coles was about twenty-three, he joined a party of miners which was on its way to the upper reaches of the Sacramento River, where it was rumoured gold had been found.

From the start he was lucky, for on the claim he pegged out gold in paying quantities was uncovered after a few hours with pick and shovel.

In a short time young Coles was in a fair way to becoming rich, but just when he was planning extensive developments on his mine he was suddenly transformed from a happy prosperous young miner into a bitter ruined man and from that day the gold fields knew him no more.

It was through a simple but dirty trick that Coles got swindled out of his mine. There was a gang of bad characters in the little boom town which had sprung up, which watched every opportunity to fleece their fellows, and learning that the young miner had never filed his claim, not thinking it was necessary, one of the scoundrels rode to the nearest record office filed on the claim in his own, and the other members of the gangs names.

When he returned he and his partners went to Coles and told him to get off their claim, at the same time presenting the official evidence of ownership. And that, said my companion, was how Black Bart came into being.

Vowing to be revenged on the scoundrels who had so shamelessly swindled him, Cole~~s~~ turned bandit and held up every stage coach which left the mines carrying gold.

In all, Black Bart held up thirty-three stages on the Santa Fé trail, yet contrary to rumour, the outlaw never harmed man, woman or child and never robbed a passenger except once and on that occasion the traveller was recognised by the outlaw as one of the gang of swindlers. A strange thing about the robberies was that they were all from coaches carrying gold from that particular mine which in all justice should still have been Cole's.

Black Bart was, soon after his thirty-third hold up, tracked to his hiding place and captured. Sent for trial he was, of course, found guilty and sentenced to a stiff term of imprisonment, and so the famous outlaw disappeared from the Santa Fé trail and the miners' gold travelled in safety once again.

Now comes the strangest part of the whole story.

When Black Bart's term in jail had expired and he was released he found a representative of the company which operated the stage line, he used to wage war on, waiting for him outside the prison. He asked the ex-convict to accompany him to the offices of his firm, the Wells Fargo Express Coy., as the directors had an offer to make him.

Coles went along with the messenger and in the managers office, he was made the astounding offer of a pension for life in return for his pledge not to rob in the future any stage of any description belonging to the Wells Fargo Express Coy. Surprised, but inwardly delighted, the outlaw accepted, for he saw the futility of continuing his former hazardous hide and seek career, so a bargain was struck and duly <sup>Redeemed</sup> ~~satisfied~~, and I imagine, said the old gentleman in conclusion, both parties gave a sigh of relief when their future worries were set at rest.

So that then is the story of Black Bart, just as I heard it in the dining room of the Monogram, simply and without exaggeration of facts or embellishment of any sort.

When my host had finished I asked him if he had ever met Black Bart, as I thought he must have, seeing he knew his history so well.

My vis-a-vis looked at me and smiled - a peculiar smile, and replied.

"Yes I knew Coles, alias Black Bart rather well, in fact still do; he is a respectable citizen of this town now you know, and you can take it from me, criminal though he was and merited his sentence, he never was so black as he was painted".

With that the old fellow after thanking me for listening so patiently to an old man's rambling memories, rose and left me

sitting thinking and wondering at the strange tale I had just been told.

Then I heard the departing guest saying goodnight to the waiter, but I was not prepared for the shock I received when I heard the waiter reply, "Goodnight, Mr. Coles".